

I count for nothing, yet
My sorrows are far from trite,
Nor has the image faded
Of dawn's moon.

I am unable to describe my feelings as the year drew to a close with each day and each night blurred by tears, so distraught that I was "unaware of the passing of spring."²⁸

The messages that arrived from His Majesty now simply asked why I did not come back without demanding my immediate return, as in the past. Not once did he refer to it, but from this time on I was aware that His Majesty's affection for me was waning. This came as no surprise, for I had committed many indiscretions, however unintentionally; and realizing this, I was reluctant to return to the palace of my own accord.

Two days before the end of the year I recalled the line "the year and my own life ebbing to their close."²⁹

The turn of the year found me copying out the *Lotus Sutra* on the backs of his letters. I was lamenting our sin—a sin so deep that Ariake would not pray to be reborn in paradise—and dreading the future.

Start here

17 (1282-84)

The tears that drenched my sleeves ill accorded with the beginning of a new year. To mark the forty-ninth day after Ariake's death, I went to the temple of a holy man I trusted not to betray my confidence.

Because it was also the fifteenth day of the first month, and thus an assembly day,³⁰ I attracted no undue attention when I brought some of the gold Ariake had kindly left me and made an offering requesting services for his soul. On the paper in which I wrapped the offering I wrote a poem:

Show him now the path to travel
To that long-awaited dawn,
Even though our bond be broken.

The holy man had an excellent reputation as a speaker, and his words were so appropriate to my condition that they brought me to tears. As I wept, I recalled some old poems about the dawn moon.

I was still in retreat on the fifteenth day of the second month, the anniversary of the Buddha's death. How many times had his death been commemorated before? Yet in my state of mind the service this year seemed especially sorrowful. I was soon comforted, however, when the *Lotus Sutra* was expounded and praised in the holy teacher's quarters during the fourteen days following the spring equinox. Each day I requested special prayers for the dead, but since I could not indicate whom they were for, I merely wrote "an unforgotten vow" on my petitions. It was most painful, however, and on the last day of the services I wrote this poem along with my usual request:

The long-awaited moon
Shall rise on that distant dawn,
Now memories of the sun
Just set bring grief.

Absolutely no word had arrived from His Maj-

esty since I had come to Higashiyama,³¹ and knowing how things stood between us did nothing to cheer me up. The night before I was to return to the capital my spirits were at a low ebb. Since the holy men were holding services all night, not sleeping until dawn, I spread out my lonely bed where I could listen to them. Toward daybreak I fell asleep and experienced an utterly lifelike vision of Ariake. He said, "A dream in your sad world, this long road of darkness." Then he embraced me.

I collapsed, becoming seriously ill and almost losing consciousness. The holy man thought I should remain, and be cared for there, but the carriage was ready, so I set out for the capital. Just as we arrived at the western span of the Kiyomizu Bridge, I saw the image from my dream actually climb into the carriage with me, at which point I fainted away. The attendant with me administered what treatment she could until we reached my old nurse's house, but even then I could hardly take a sip of water.

I remained in critical condition until after the middle of the third month, by which time it was evident that I was pregnant. There was no room for any doubt about who the father was, for since the dawn when Ariake and I parted finally I had not so much as exchanged innocent glances with a man.³² I now longed for him, even though our relationship had been a secret one full of sorrows, and I was eager for the baby to be born so that I might see it with my own eyes. My emotions overwhelmed me.

In the middle of the fourth month His Majesty summoned me, saying it was a matter of importance. Unwilling to go in my present condition, I

sent word that I was still confined by illness. To this he replied:

With nothing but a memory,
How can your love persist?
Departed from this sad world
Is the dawn moon.

"Could it be something more than grief that summons forth such tears? What about your friend of old?"

When I read his letter I thought he was simply upset at my devotion to the memory of Ariake, but this was not the case at all. Nakayori, my nurse's son, had held the sixth rank when Kameyama was the reigning emperor, and upon that sovereign's abdication Nakayori was promoted to the fifth rank and made a lieutenant—all the while continuing to serve Kameyama. GoFukakusa apparently heard a rumor that Nakayori was serving as go-between for Kameyama and myself, and that Kameyama was using him to carry messages of love to me night and day in the hope that GoFukakusa and I would become estranged. At the time I knew nothing of this rumor.

Early in the fifth month, having regained my strength, I decided to return to the palace before my condition became obvious, yet upon arriving there I discovered to my chagrin that His Majesty had nothing to say to me. On the surface my life at the palace was unchanged, but I grew depressed as the days and nights passed monotonously. I continued to serve until the sixth month, when the death of a relative gave me an excuse to leave.

This time I wanted very much to conceal my pregnancy, so I secluded myself in the house of a rela-

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child

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tive near Higashiyama. There no one bothered to visit me, and I felt that my life had changed completely by the time my labor commenced on the twentieth day of the eighth month. The previous time I had also given birth secretly, but at least a few people called on me then. Now my period of waiting passed with only the cries of deer in the hills to console me. It was a safe delivery, and the child was a boy, but curiously enough, I had no feelings for him.

Ariake's dream of turning into a mandarin duck had proved to be accurate. I mourned my fate. As long as I could remember, I had regretted being separated from my own mother at age two, scarcely knowing her face; but this child was still in my womb when his father died. What did it portend?

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K320

Such thoughts were running through my mind when the baby was put down right beside me. I was told there was not even a wet nurse available. While one was being sought in vain, my poor baby fell asleep at my side. It was not long before he was soaking wet underneath. That would never do, I thought, and I quickly changed him. As he lay again sleeping beside me I began, for the first time, to understand the depths of a mother's love. For more than forty days I took care of him myself, begrudging every moment he was out of my hands. Then a suitable nurse was located in Yamazaki, and after she arrived the baby slept beside her.

Winter set in, but the thought of returning to life in the palace was as unpleasant as ever. At last His Majesty wrote inquiring about my reasons for staying away, and at the beginning of the tenth month I returned and was serving at the palace when the year ended.

Participation in the New Year's festivities only increased my sorrows, for although His Majesty never admitted anything was wrong, I sensed a growing estrangement and found life in his palace depressingly lonely. Only Akebono, now no more than a figure from my past, continued to inquire about me, verifying the words of that poem, "bitterness, unable to hold its own."³³ Akebono

The Buddhist lectures marking the equinox in the second month were held at the Saga Palace, and despite the fact that I was there with both retired emperors, I could not rid myself of the vision I had seen the previous year at this time. From my wretchedness I prayed to Buddha: "Thou who promised salvation to all, please guide him, lest he remain lost and wandering in delusion." I could think of nothing else.

A hidden love and tears
Enough to form a river—
Were there a shoal of meeting
I would drown this self of mine.

Thoughts in this vein only added to my wretchedness. Vexed at the ways of this world, I wanted to sink to the river bottom like a bit of debris, and I even began sorting through useless old papers. But then I thought of my two-year-old infant.³⁴ If I drowned myself, who would take pity on him? The same reasoning prevented me from entering holy orders. Suddenly he seemed very dear. *

With no one to visit the shore
Where the seedling pine grows
What kind of fate would it meet?

After Their Majesties had returned to the palace

I took a brief leave to visit my son and found that he was much bigger than I had imagined. Seeing him smile and babble and even laugh, I felt pangs of concern, and left wondering if my visit had been a good idea after all.

In early autumn I received a letter from my grandfather, Lord Takachika, which said: "Prepare to leave the palace permanently. I'll send for you tonight." Unable to comprehend this, I took it to His Majesty and asked him to explain, only to be turned away without a reply.

Next I went to Lady Genki (I think she was called Lady Sammi at that time) and told her of my bewilderment. "I can't understand what is happening. I received this letter and asked His Majesty about it, but he wouldn't answer me," I said. She replied that she did not know either.

It appeared I would have to leave. As I made ready for my departure, I recalled coming to the palace for the first time in the ninth month of the year I was four. Ever since that time I had felt a certain uneasiness about being away from the palace even briefly, so I could not accept the fact that today was really the end. I stared at even the trees and grasses in the garden until tears blurred my vision.

I was told that Akebono had arrived and asked where I was. Beside myself with anxiety, I went out to see him, my tear-spotted sleeves showing evidence of my weeping.

He wanted to know what the matter was, and for a silent moment I thought, "Even consolation brings pain." Then I handed him the letter I had received that morning. All I said was, "This is what makes me sad." I admitted him to my room and

burst into tears. He too was at a loss to explain it, for it seemed no one could understand this business.

Several of the older court ladies came around to offer their sympathy, but being ignorant of the truth behind the situation I could only weep. That evening I was embarrassed to appear before His Majesty, knowing that it had to be his will that I leave; yet I had no idea what lay ahead, and I longed to see him once again, perhaps for the last time. I was trembling when I entered his quarters, where several nobles were chatting together. My costume was a red formal jacket worn over a raw silk gown with a design of vines and grasses embroidered on it in green thread.

GoFukakusa glanced at me. "Are you leaving this evening?" he asked. I stood there, unable to frame a reply, and he continued, "Perhaps I'll receive word of you through some mountain hermit. The green vines must be unhappy."³⁵ As he mumbled this he stood up and left, probably to go to Empress Higashi-Nijō's apartments.

Curiously, I felt no bitterness at his abrupt departure, yet I did not fully comprehend what had brought it about. Our relationship was of many years' standing, and he had frequently assured me that his personal feelings would never cause us to be separated. I felt an impulse to vanish from this world at once; but in vain, for a carriage awaited me. On the one hand I wanted nothing more than to run away and hide myself, but on the other, I was curious to learn what had happened. So I proceeded to Lord Takachika's mansion in the Second Ward.

Takachika greeted me himself.³⁶ He said, "Old age

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leave

Akebono

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has come upon me like an incurable disease, and lately my health has become so bad that I have little hope of surviving long. Yet still I have to worry about you. Your father is not alive and Takaaki is no longer here to care for you.³⁷ All the worry has fallen on my shoulders, and now because of this letter from Empress Higashi-Nijō, I have been forced to withdraw you from the palace.”

He held out the letter for me to read: “I am displeased by her persistent involvement with His Majesty and her slights to me. You will recall her to your house at once and keep her there. Her mother is dead so you will have to make plans for her.” The entire letter was written in the empress’s own hand.

It would have been impossible for me to remain at the palace under such circumstances, and once I was completely away from it I experienced a sense of relief. Yet as I lay awake through the gradually lengthening nights listening to the sounds of wooden mallets beating silk, it seemed that they were echoing near my pillow to inquire after me. And sometimes I imagined that the wild geese winging through the cloudy sky had chosen the ivy around my worry-filled house to shed their tears on.

The days and nights passed slowly until the year drew to its close. Since I could play no part in any of the activities ushering the old year out and the new year in, I decided to fulfill my long-standing desire to make a one-thousand-day retreat at the Gion Shrine. Before, there had always been too many hindrances, but now, on the second day of the eleventh month (the first day of the hare), I set off, going first to the Hachiman Shrine to see

the *kagura* dances.³⁸ I remembered the poet who had written “I never cease to give my heart to the gods,”³⁹ and I composed this poem:

Depend on the gods, I hang
My hopes on them—a sash
Of mulberry bark—in vain;
I loathe my useless self.⁴⁰

After a seven-day retreat at the Hachiman Shrine I went on to Gion. With no further reason to remain in the world, I now prayed to be led from this human realm through the gates of enlightenment.

This year marked the third anniversary of Ariake’s death. I attended a seven-day series of lectures on the *Lotus Sutra* held at the temple of the holy man from Higashiyama, going there each day and returning to Gion at night. The date of the final service coincided with the anniversary of Ariake’s death, and the tolling of the bells that day moved me to tears.

Echoes of ceremonial bells
Joined by sounds of my sobbing.
Does something in me linger yet
In this world of sorrow?

Anxious to avoid gossip, I had our son raised in secret, and from time to time I consoled myself by visiting him. At the beginning of the new year⁴¹ he was toddling about a little and even talking some. As yet, he had not the slightest knowledge of sorrow and suffering. I felt extremely sympathetic toward him. ← end here

During the previous autumn, that dreadful time, my grandfather Takachika had died, but my grief had